2. PRISONS AS INDUSTRY

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DEFINITION

INDUSTRY:

1. Commercial production and sale of goods;
2. A specific branch of manufacture and trade: "the textile industry." *See Synonyms at business;*
3. The sector of an economy made up of manufacturing enterprises: government regulation of industry;
4. Industrial management; industrial;
5. Pertaining to *trade* or *manufacture.*

WHAT IS THE AMERICAN CORRECTIONAL ASSOCIATION?

The ACA began as a prison reform group in the 1800s, advocating for humane conditions in prisons. It devised an accreditation system, ratings that guaged whether prisons met 'humane standards of confinement.' As we see here, however, they also manage much of the commerce and profit generated by prison growth, even having an interest in the 'success' of all the many companies who run the prisons they accredit.

THE FIRST PLACE CORRECTIONS GOES is to a *prison trade show.*

While the Prison Boom has meant vast growth in the number of prisoners and prisons throughout the US, its $55 billion a year price tag has also made prisons look like a big source of profit. In the 1990s, Wall Street even labeled prisons a "growth industry," and it has since been sought by investors, stock brokers, entrepreneurs and businesses from around the world — people who aren't interested in "corrections," but are interested in making money.

THIS PRISON TRADE SHOW is held twice a year by the **American Correctional Association (ACA),** in different cities around the U.S. This one is in Nashville, where we see all those who *work* in the prison system, who *invest* in the prison system, who *manage*, *supply* and *service* the prison system, trading with one another in the booming profits of the Prison Boom. Together, they form an industry of "manufacture and trade" in incarceration; a true *prison industry.*



A booth selling wall padding

The hosting organization, the ACA, functions as the trade association for the whole prison industry, but instead of calling the event a *trade show,* it calls it a "conference," trying to minimize the trade show's commercialism, and instead, promote an appearance of public service and 'professionalism.'

Here we see the profits of the Prison Boom translate into *desire,* the desire to *continue profitting* and *keep the system growing.* How does this impact the stated purposes of corrections? How does it affect the prison system and the Prison Boom? How does it affect us in our communities outside of prisons?

"It's not the best thing to say that there are more and more prisons being built...but that's what keeps us in business. This was one of our best years, and things are only getting better!"
—Salesman at the ACA Trade Show



WHO MAKES UP THE PRISON INDUSTRY?

At the ACA trade show, we see multi–million dollar business being done. We see companies that **build prisons** and ones who provide **construction materials** to prisons—like concrete, bricks and windows, and pre–made cells (called "pre–fab" cells), ready to be stacked up like building blocks. We see people who build and sell **security fencing, surveillance cameras, firearms, tear gas, uniforms and clothing, blankets, beds, riot gear, tables and chairs, restraint devices and shackles, wall padding for 'suicide cells,' hi–tech door locks and ID machines, human tracking devices, office materials and furniture, medical services and food.**



Business men chat, leaning on prison bunks

It typically costs between **$25,000** and **$80,000** to keep one person locked up for one year, and here we see all the people whose living depends on that money, by selling each aspect of construction, service and technology that goes into a prison. And for each business and sales person, the amount their business continues to profit and grow depends on how much the **system** itself grows; their success depends on *more people* going to prison each day, month and year.

But when it comes to prisons, 'profit' comes in many forms. Add to these interests the groups that profit the most from prison growth — *Prison Guard Unions, Sheriff's Departments and Police Departments, Departments of Corrections, Prison Construction Companies, and Private Prison Corporations* — and you see that the

A SMALL CITY

The prison trade show also shows us a **microcosm** of prisons, where all the elements of prisons and prison life (aside from contraband) are seen for sale.

A prison is like a *small city,* because when the state cuts someone off from the rest of the world and revokes their freedom, it is obligated by law to provide all the basic, essential elements of life that the prisoner needs.

Just like the citizens of a town, the 'residents' of a prison need electricity, heat, water, food, shelter and clothing, medical care, a bed and the chance to exercise. More than we are led to believe however, these basics are not provided, which helps lead to physical and mental abuse. But because prisons are so secretive, they're usually not held accountable until someone takes them to court.

On the business side, here at the trade show, we see all the aspects of this **"small city" sold and contracted.** This can help us to envision the *scope of what it means to lock up mass numbers of human beings, what prison life means for prisoners,* and *what a prison means for the communities in which they are built.*

Its easy to talk big about locking up people, but it is dangerous to underestimate what denying citizens their 'freedom' really means.

system is much more than just a ‘marketplace.’

Added together, their collective interests show that there doesn’t have to be a single, big ‘conspiracy’ to drive a prison boom for ‘corrupt’ reasons. All one has to do is add up the sum total of these individual sales people, their needs and desire to make a decent living; expand that out to all of the individual prison guards, bureaucrats and government officials in the system, and one sees a massive, diverse and interconnected engine for growth, filled with incentives to grow and expand all along the way, *all of them needing more people to fill prison beds.*

And while the ACA is in the primary ‘manager’ of this industry, it is also responsible for the **accredidation** of prisons and jails in the U.S. Many of these prisons are now run by private companies, and the success of these companies depends on their being accredited. But as a large part of the overall prison industry, they have to be successful (accredited) for the ACA to be make its money.



Richard Stalder, Head of Louisiana’s Dept of Corrections, cuts the ‘opening ribbon’

How critically do you think prisons will be evaluated on human rights standards, on abuse and corruption, if their evaluator (the ACA) has a stake in that prison’s success? Do you think the ACA can put its business interests aside when it accredits a prison? Especially when it knows that its accredidation mean success for the entire industry?

INDUSTRIES GROW

One thing we know from watching businesses and a profit–based economy is that, even though individual businesses compete with one another, they also depend on *each other.* All businesses in any given industry work together to:

A. Grow their overall industry,
B. Increase the demand for what that industry provides.

Profit comes to a business from either:

A. Growing its production and sales,
B. Reducing the costs of its production.

The prison business, no matter what they tell you or put on their website or in a marketing video, is no exception — *the industry couldn’t exist otherwise.* No discusses this at the trade show. They either don’t care, or seem to think that the prison system is just “growing by itself,” and they’re happy to just do their job, “providing the public with what it needs.”

“PRODUCTIVE CITIZENS”: PRISONS AND INDUSTRY IN HISTORY

Finally, as the trade show presents us with a ‘prison industry,’ we could also say the term prison industry is redundant, for modern prisons have more to do with *industry* than just that.



Modern prisons were invented, as places where mass numbers of people would get locked up for long periods of time only about two hundred years ago.

Born along side the modern, industrial factory, today’s large scale prisons were modeled after those same factories, and most were actually factories themselves. The modern pennitentiary was created as an institution to enhance the profits of industrialists by helping to form a *working class* out of the peasant classes who were being forced off their farmland, from the ‘commons,’ and disciplining them into an industrial ‘productive force.’



While this is the basic history in Europe and the Northern U.S., in the U.S. South, smaller prisons were built in the cities and along side plantations, to move textile production, enhance the profits of the plantation class and make plantation labor more productive. After the Civil War however, after chattel slavery was abolished and the Southern capitalists lost their source of *free labor,* full pennitentiaries were built on the plantations themselves, on the *plantation model* rather than the *factory model.* Here, is what amounted to legalized slave camps, ‘criminalized’ former slaves and poor whites were sent to replenish that free labor force, picking cotton, building roads, railroads and levees.



In both cases, the modern prison was used to discipline workers (keeping workers’ wages and quality of living to a minimum), while exploiting prisoners’ labor as *free labor,* removing the people who *could not work* or *would not work* from working communities, and neutralizing political dissidents and revolutionaries who threatened the economic relations within that system.

Throughout all known history, imprisonment has

FACILITATING GROWTH / DRIVING GROWTH

While the Prison Boom has stimulated growth within the prison industry, all this for–profit business and private investment have also allowed the *prison system itself* to grow far beyond its old limits, and now, encourage the system to grow even more.

For the most part, the size of the prison system is (supposed to be) controlled ‘democratically.’ One example of this is the fact that the only thing that can really stop a new prison project is the public: citizens who organize in protest and speak out against it.

But more so, when the state wants to build a new prison, the public is supposed to vote on whether or not to let them, voting ‘yes’ or ‘no’ on a **prison bond,** which gives the state public money to pay for it. Therefore, the size of the prison system is limited by the amount of public tax money the public approves.

But the introduction of *private* money into the system, as **finance capital** that does **not** have to be voted on, and which is mainly supplied by *private prison corporations* and *investment banks,* has allowed the system to go *around* the public, and to grow far beyond its ‘democratic’ limits.

So while the Prison Boom produces profit, that profit in turn, stimulates further growth of the system. The system stimulates the industry and the industry stimulates growth; back and forth. Therefore, the introduction of private finance capital has not only broken the traditional limits of the system, in opposition to the public’s demands, but their success has, in turn, come to stimulate and influence more growth than anyone could have ever imagined.

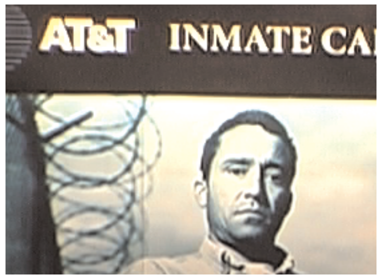
WHERE ARE THE PRISONERS?



Another component of the trade show is workshops, or “seminars,” where new technologies, “management strategies” and “trade secrets” are shared amongst the “vendors” and “participants.” While the tremendous energy poured into all this should fuel creative solutions for better systems that could truly bring health and safety to our communities, the seminar participants appear no more concerned with that than the salespeople do at their booths. This might be because of who *is there* at the trade show, but perhaps it is also because of who is *not there.*

While the majority of people at the trade show are business people and "industry professionals" (prison guards, prison and jail officials), there is virtually no one there who represents the interests of communities, or more importantly, those who are locked up or have loved ones locked up.

The seminar participants are mostly academics, 'experts,' business executives, sales people, and bureaucratic professionals, who, despite the good intentions of a few, are still there like the vendors are, concerned with the success of abstract studies and theories and government contracts. Seldom does one encounter anyone who has actually been incarcerated, lived in a community sucked dry of its resources and livelihood and overrun with police, who have perhaps been the victims of this profit making, and is willing to speak truthfully against the **free market idealism** of the trade show.



Because of the exclusion of prisoners, who many would argue are the *real experts*, the conversations appear removed from reality, detached from any real interest in solving social problems, committed only to bettering their individual careers which *profit* from those social problems. Indeed, careers which *depend* on those social problems and their continued existence.

So is it then not *ironic* but *obvious* that prisoners, their families and communities would NOT be invited to the trade show, kept from entering or challenging the discourse there?

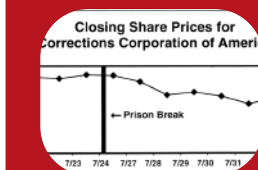
LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE: CHANGING THE ROLE OF 'CRIME'

This same problem, of *who* is allowed to speak and enter the 'discourse,' exists on a larger, **systemic** level as well. Since the Prison Boom has grown the agencies and businesses that make their livings from imprisoning people, these same agencies are now powerful enough to totally exclude all others from entering into dialogue about the system, or attitudes toward "crime" and punishment. Just as the trade show excludes prisoners and their communities, the prison industry, law enforcement, and their political and academic allies have excluded them from society's larger **discourse** on "crime" and punishment.

Language is a very powerful thing, as it influences *behavior, possibilities* and *outcomes.* Our very opinions and beliefs about the world depend on language, on the explanations we receive through the media and politics. Today, the varied interests of the Prison Industrial Complex have a monopoly over those explanations, excluding any criticism or analysis of racism, classism, sexism or anything that would expose or criticize the Prison Boom. Instead, they pour tremendous energy into keeping all discourse focused on arguments to grow the system more, to keep more people locked up and for longer, and searching for other problems within society that aren't

always been about labor and servitude, fit in similar ways into each society's economic and social systems. In modern times, criminalization and imprisonment became more about supporting large scale industry, while allowing the wealth that was produced to be concentrated into the pockets of the industrialists and plantation owners.







Today, as more and more industrial type production is being moved *out* of the U.S. and the 'First World' in general, the real difference is that prison industries are becoming an industry *in and of itself,* moved from the role of *supporting industry,* to *becoming an industry,* in the vacuum created by economic (capitalist) globalization.

yet thought of as "crime," but can be converted into "crime" politically.

At the trade show, **language** was one of the most startling aspects, for there, all of this language of "corrections" was mis–translated further, into a *commercial* context. As the language of "lock 'em up and throw away the key" (forever, and bill the state) was converted into the commercial rhetoric of a profit based industry, where any language about rehabilitation and *reducing* the prison population was replaced by the language of sales and commodities.

The humanity of prisoners was disappeared; they were talked about like livestock, as product or inventory to be counted, shipped and stocked. In a profit oriented context, prisoners are inevitably reduced to being a raw material, a potentially unlimited supply of what makes the prison industry go, grow and boom. This language reflects upon the commercial trade show and the ACA, but also, it clearly reveals the overall prison system's total detachment, its disconnection from any possible role of helping or bettering communities, connected only to the logic of an industry, one built upon the stubborn language of "law and order" which masks any realities of racism, as "corrections" increasingly becomes about **warehousing,** social control and profit.

NOTES